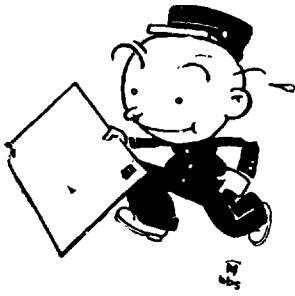


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### Ohio State Engineer

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# On W. P. A.

*Editor's Note: Not long ago, our mail contained a pamphlet telling what WPA thinks of itself. It was a report made to various societies, councils, like the Professional Engineering Council, by WPA agencies. Here is what several staff members did with the report.*

## A Brief Review of the WPA

THE Works Progress Administration should be of special interest to all engineering students, not as a source of jokes, nor for any particular economic reason, but rather as a gigantic project employing the fundamental laws of engineering as a basic foundation, for nearly all of its public projects are engineering tasks requiring planning and supervision by competent engineers of practically every classification.

It therefore becomes profitable to study the set up, organization and purpose of the WPA as well as to comprehend the pros and cons dealing with this program.

The WPA was established by Executive Order number 7034 on May 6, 1935 under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. It has since been continued with certain revisions and changes up to June 30, 1940.

The purpose of the WPA was to furnish work relief and increase employment by providing useful public work projects.

A Federal Administrator is appointed by the President as the head of the Works Progress Administration. He is represented by Regional Field Representatives who act as authoritative liaison agents between the Federal Administrator and the various State WPA. It is their duty to see that the orders are obeyed by the State organizations and to make reports and recommendations to the Federal Administrator. They are assisted by a staff including Regional Engineers, Regional Directors of the Division of Women's and Professional Projects, Regional Examiners, Regional Statistician, and Director of Division of Employment. The Federal Administrator is Col. F. C. Harrington while Major B. M. Horloe, Corps of Engineers, U. S. A., is Assistant Administrator and Chief Engineer. A Division of investigation of WPA handles alleged irregularities to insure honest execution of the program.

Each state uses a set up and organization similar to the Regional Administration with a state WPA Administrator in charge with others under him in charge

of professional projects, educational projects, recreational projects, employment and finance.

State WPA administrators are responsible for coordination of WPA operations with the execution of projects conducted by other Federal Agencies to provide maximum useful employment for persons in need.

The United States Employment Service is in charge of registration of workers, the Treasury Department of the accounting and disbursement and U. S. Employee's Compensation Commission of handling accident compensation.

Another well known subdivision of the WPA is the National Youth Administration with a Federal Administrator appointed by the President with duties similar to the Federal Administrator of the WPA. One function of the NYA is in aiding students in colleges and secondary schools through the aid of part time jobs about the campus as helpers of the faculty. This work is limited in hours to be worked as well as a maximum pay to be received. Graduates receive as high as 40 dollars a month whereas undergraduates receive an average of about 15 dollars a month.

It is recording the funds used by the relief agency that, using a well known phrase, "causes strong men to faint", for, using 1938 as an example, 1,425,000,000 dollars was granted to the WPA in addition to the balance of the 1937 relief fund. However, when we examine the many projects for which this fund is used, and realize the hundreds of thousands of persons employed, the enormity of this money should not seem so excessive. The act governing this appropriation specifically allots 484,500,000 dollars for highways, roads, and streets; 655,000,000 dollars for public buildings, parks and other recreational facilities, public utilities, electrical transmission or distribution lines or systems to serve persons in rural areas, including projects sponsored by and for the benefit of non-profit and cooperative associations, sewer systems, water supply and purification systems, airports and other transportation facilities, flood control, drainage; irrigation and conservation, eradication of insect pests, and fertilizing development. In addition, 295,000,000 dollars is granted for educational, professional, clerical, cultural, recreational, production, service, and miscellaneous non-construction projects.

From the above listing, it is seen that about 75 per cent of the projects are of a direct engineering constitution, requiring civil, mechanical, electrical, and

# by W. P. A.

As reviewed by Donald Postlewaite, Gordon Shisler, and Joseph Selby

chemical engineers. Furthermore, as such a vast program would naturally require the purchase of huge quantities of material of all natures, it can safely be assumed that all classifications of engineers have an indirect interest in this program.

Projects are to be partially financed by the sponsors of the project. These sponsors must have their project investigated by local and state offices of the WPA which in time must present this to the Federal WPA, and, if deemed worthy, is approved by the President. The eligibility is determined upon social desirability and relation to coordinated planning, relation to unemployment and recovery, engineering and technical soundness of the project, and examination of the supervision and administration. Eligibility of employees requires that ninety-five percent of those working on projects must be in need of relief with certain specified exceptions mentioned. A person must not be under eighteen years of age or in poor health for the work assigned. Farmers needing employment to supplement farm income are granted work on various rural projects. The working conditions of all projects must be safe. All citizens or aliens who have filed declarations of intention to become citizens before enactment of the current relief legislation are eligible and no discrimination shall be made against those who have training and experience fitting them for specific jobs in the program. No person will be accepted who has previously refused work on other Federal or non-Federal concerns at equal or greater compensation, for a worker must accept bonafide offers of private employment whether of a permanent or temporary basis, if they are capable of so doing and the previously mentioned financial conditions are met. However, a person is entitled to reemployment on WPA if such a position was lost through no fault of his own. New requirements demanding the lay-off of WPA employees who have served over a period of several months were passed by the last congress to further discourage the adoption of WPA as a career.

The pay rate is scheduled in the following manner: three groups or classes are designated with certain states falling in each group, with Class I, including Ohio, receiving the highest scale, Class II, the lower scale and Class III, the least. This is determined by the living costs in certain sections of the country, with the Southern states receiving Class III rating as the cost of living is materially lower in those states. It is further classified by population densities for urban centers of over 100,000 persons, down in successive

figures to under 5000 persons, with the rate of pay progressively decreasing from a maximum in urban centers to a minimum in rural areas. Finally, the labor is classified into four groups: professional and technical, skilled labor, intermediate and unskilled labor, the lowest paid. Hence the highest pay would be to a person in a professional or technical position in the Group I area and in a community of over 100,000 in population. Such a person would receive 99 dollars a month. The least paid person would be an unskilled laborer in a group III district in a rural area of less than 5,000 population. Such a person would receive 26 dollars a month.

It becomes evident from a study of the organization of the WPA that it is essentially an engineering project on a vast scale, subject to errors and in need of trained and efficient administrators.

## Major Faults of the WPA Program

It is inevitable that, in any large organization such as the WPA, weaknesses will sooner or later come to the surface. These faults have been brought to light as a result of numerous community appraisals which were, of course, not in complete agreement.

The most universal complaint is that employment needs are, at best, only partially satisfied. White collar workers are provided for only in large communities and great numbers of single men and women are excluded in order that married men may be taken care of. A remedy suggested by widespread opinion is to lessen the restrictions so as to include the really needy unemployed as well as those on the relief rolls. The answer to that, of course, is that the already slim appropriations would not stand the drain.

Small communities maintain that they are refused appropriations because of the lack of experts to fill out the highly technical applications which the administration headquarters require before appropriations can be made. Meanwhile, willing, able-bodied workmen are forced to accept relief while proposed projects are held up by needless red tape. The winter season in the northern states is the source of another problem in localities where the projects consist wholly of roadwork. Again the cry arises for more appropriations for school buildings and other projects suitable for winter employment.

The reluctance of workers to leave a project for temporary private employment for fear they will not be able to return is most disastrous to the very purpose

of the WPA. It is impossible to regard this condition as anything but purely unnecessary bureaucratic red tape.

Supervision is often poor, according to the survey, and this is not only disgusting to the observers but to the workers who are blamed for the resulting inefficiency of the organization as a whole. On the other hand, where supervision is good, the quality of workmanship is comparable with that of private industry.

Adoption of the "prevailing wage" plan by the WPA, while at the same time maintaining a maximum monthly wage lower than that of private industry, has resulted in short hours for large numbers of skilled workers. Resentful of this, the farmers in all rural communities have refused to vote for expenditures on WPA projects. A great number of reports stated that a discrimination should be made between the efficient workers and the less efficient and that they should be paid accordingly. From the above criticism, it is clear that the difficulty lies not in one particular grievance, but in all the characteristics which set WPA work apart from private employment.

Much uncertainty often arises in localities where planning is under way for community improvements. This is because the WPA was created primarily for the worker and must decrease and increase its size to meet shifting employment needs. The WPA cannot and never will be a highly coordinated organization for the purpose of providing cities with needed improvements simply for the reason that it must first fit the needs of its individual workers. As a result of the insufficiency of the program, the smaller communities are overwhelmingly in favor of a program which employs more non-relief workers and also furnishes materials and equipment for the projects. Several references have been made to the old CWA program, which took the majority of its workers from outside the relief rolls, as a possible solution to the trouble.

### **Benefits of Program**

No discussion of the WPA would be complete without a mention of the benefits, or satisfactory results of the program. These can be divided into three different groups, each of which we shall discuss briefly in order of their importance.

The most noticeable result of WPA work is the physical, or that which can be seen and appreciated more readily. There is very little argument over the merits of these projects, especially in view of the fact that the community in which they are situated benefits greatly, at a relatively low cost to the community. This classification includes such works as the construction of schools and community centers, the building of farm to market roads, drainage of swamps, and the laying of sewers and water mains. There are many minor projects, which are not so large, as these, but are just as important. The satisfaction and pride with which the work is regarded generally is in itself a tribute to the program.

The progress which has been made in the last few years by the WPA in providing civic facilities and conveniences would probably have taken ten or twenty years if the cities themselves had undertaken the work,

due to limited city budgets. There are very few people in the country who have not benefited directly from these works, whether they be necessities such as roads and bridges, or conveniences, such as municipal playgrounds, stadia, etc.

One must take into consideration the past conditions of neglect of important civic facilities and of community discouragement and the betterment of these conditions by the WPA to fully appreciate the necessity of this phase of the work. Statements of approval of such works by public officials, who have been vehement in their criticism of the other portions of the Administration's policy, merely serve to emphasize our statements. The need for these projects, their worthiness, and their lasting character are almost universally asserted.

It is to be noted that the large cities favor white collar projects of practically every kind (education-literary classes, vocational training, etc.; public health projects-clinics, nursing, survey and research, etc.; library and museum projects; service projects-school lunches, handicrafts, gardening, canning, etc.; recreation; cultural projects; public administration projects, tax delinquency surveys, engineering surveys, traffic surveys, etc.) in contrast to the small town demands for physical ones. This is due partly to the fact that the larger communities already have many of the advantages that the smaller ones are asking for, and partly to the demand for more of the cultural type of projects in the larger cities.

Those few projects reported in the small cities are usually education and recreation programs, and the reception has not been wholly enthusiastic, although the majority of the people seem to appreciate the work and official commendations have not been lacking. Some of the education projects appear to have become permanent parts of the school systems. The recreation projects, apparently due to poor supervision, have not been successful, many of them having been abandoned. The need for such projects is still apparent in many communities. One peculiar property of the work is that it can be absorbed by communities, if the necessity for such work is realized. Education and recreation projects rank high among those deemed of sufficient importance to be carried on by local governmental agencies. For the success of such projects, active and responsible local sponsorship, or co-sponsorship, and expert supervision appear to be the determining factors. When these are present, community assistance is usually volunteered and when federal support is withdrawn, the local government often steps in. A highly successful project draws attention to those participating in it and often results in positions in private industry for them. This part of the program (effective private employment) has been accomplished, although the future usefulness of the program is correspondingly impaired. A need of some sort of a municipal regulation to coordinate these two parts of the program is evident but cannot be fulfilled due to lack of funds. Under the heading of white collar work we may consider NYA work. There has never been any doubt as to the need and value of this work. Both large communities and small show appreciation of it.

The workmanship on WPA projects is a subject of much discussion. The public, as a whole, does not think much of it, but if we let the result speak for itself, there seem to be no grounds for this opinion. The phrase "good workmanship" does not have any one specific meaning, which adds to our difficulty in judging the work. It may mean that the final results were good, but the work did not progress as rapidly as it would have, had skilled men been on the job. This must be conceded to critics of the WPA, that in many cases workers have to be broken in, thus slowing up the progress. On WPA, age is no limit, while in private industry, only young men would be on the job. Some observers believe that the older men slow up the job, but others maintain that their experience provides a balance for the comparative inexperience of the younger, but faster workers.

Another part to be considered is the experience which the younger men get. Some of them learn trades, which will possibly enable them to earn their living later in life and will certainly make it easier for them to obtain jobs in industry. These trained men should be regarded as an asset to the community and should be considered as an indirect benefit of the WPA.

There is some argument as to the benefits of work relief over direct relief in view of the higher cost of work relief. This is a debatable question and we leave it to the reader to decide: i. e. do the extra benefits of work relief compensate for the extra cost? We have already given most of these extra benefits and their extra cost is apparent.

## In Retrospect

In looking back over the report of the National Appraisal Committee, which was summarized under the faults and benefits of the program, a perhaps startling realization comes to us. This "bridge from relief to work", this so-called "temporary work relief program" now in its fifth year of existence, has actually become established in the minds of the American people as a permanent fixture, a fixture which, if removed, would surely result in some unforeseen disaster. Shall the WPA be continued? If it is allowed to expand much further, gradual displacement of private industry will certainly result. Is it good logic to invest the American taxpayer's money in working against American industry which, without this interference, could hire at least part of these men? Would it not be more logical to subsidize American industry, to a certain extent, with WPA funds so that they might hire the men who are now employed on projects? In other words, instead of the WPA hiring the workers itself, why not help the American business man to hire them? They are, certainly, the men who should be hiring the workers. Obviously, they could hire men to accomplish the same projects and could manage them as well as the WPA administration. There is no question that the purpose of the WPA is worthy. It seems to be the matter of how the purpose is being carried out that is causing so much of the criticism. We cannot, as engineers, ignore this problem. We cannot afford to ignore any vital question which affects the future economic welfare of our democracy.